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ABSTRACT

Recent debates among educators about the middle school curriculum involve three concepts: (1) middle school ought to provide a general education school in which the curriculum focuses on widely shared concerns of early adolescents and the larger world rather than specialization among separate subjects; (2) the curriculum ought to serve the students; and (3) adolescents should not be viewed as victims of their developmental stage. These concepts, along with the notion of curriculum integration, point to a vision for middle school curricula that addresses the questions adolescents have about themselves and their world, and questions shared by adolescents and older people. This vision results in a curriculum organized around themes rather than artificial subject areas. The vision has been put into practice in the Marquette Middle School in Madison, Wisconsin. In this new curriculum vision, students are given a voice in curriculum planning. Meanings are created by students rather than imposed by adults. Knowledge and skill are removed from abstract subject categories. The curriculum integrates affect and cognition, and the curriculum is integrated and whole, rather than divided into blocks of time devoted to subject courses. Proposals for integrative curricula focus on the middle level because professionals at the middle level have been more involved in school reform than those at other levels. Six references are cited. (BC)

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ERIC Digest

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Integrated Curriculum in the Middle School

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Recent debates among educators about the middle school curriculum involve three critical concepts. The first is that the middle school ought to be a general education school in which the curriculum focuses on widely shared concerns of early adolescents and the larger world rather than increasing specialization and differentiation among separate subjects. The second concept is that while the middle school curriculum is subject to many demands, its primary purpose ought to be to serve the early adolescents who attend the school.

The third concept involves revision of the increasingly popular view of early adolescents simply as victims of their developmental stage: for example, "hormones with feet." These labels demean early adolescents and encourage low expectations and gimmicks like slogan systems, coupons, and bumper stickers designed simply to "keep the hormones in check" (Arnold, 1980). Instead, early adolescents can be seen as real human beings who participate in the larger world and have serious concerns about both the world and their own adolescence.

These three concepts, along with the notion of curriculum integration, point to a compelling possibility for middle school curriculum. This new vision begins with two kinds of questions: those that early adolescents have about themselves and their world and those widely shared by people in the larger world (Beane, 1990a). Early adolescents often have questions about the physical changes they're experiencing, their identities, their relations with peers and adult authority figures, and their prospects. At the same time, they share with all of us concerns about life in a changing world, the environment, wealth and poverty, cultural diversity and racism, and so on. Moreover, their questions about themselves are often personal versions of a larger-world question, concerning, for example, the connections between conflict with adults and peers and conflict on a global scale. In other words, at the intersection of concerns from early adolescents and from the larger world, we can begin to imagine powerful themes that connect the two and thus offer a promising possibility for organizing an integrative curriculum (Beane, 1990a).

The emerging vision of a middle school curriculum is organized around rich themes from these two sources rather than artificial subject areas. Imagine a unit on identities in which students examine how self-perceptions are formed, how culture influences self-concepts, and how increasing cultural diversity promises to reshape politics and the economy. In such a unit, early adolescents develop skills related to communication, problem-solving, research, and social action. They expand their critical, creative, and reflective thinking skills and become acquainted with a rich array of facts and concepts from a wide variety of sources. They can explore enduring, but elusive, ideas like democracy, human dignity, and cultural diversity (Beane, 1990b).

An Example of the New Curriculum

At Marquette Middle School in Madison, Wisconsin, a group of teachers carried out a thematic unit that followed the new curriculum vision. The unit began with the students listing questions about themselves and their world and then identifying a number of themes that the questions suggested. Students then selected one theme, living in the future, and listed activities they might use to answer questions related to it.

The activities suggest just how such a curriculum works. One involved designing a model for the city of Madison in the year 2020 and required integrating the work of committees on the environment, transportation, government, education, and health. Another activity called for investigating family health histories to determine personal risk factors in the future. A third brought an artist into the school to sketch pictures of how the students might look in 30 years and discuss physical effects of aging. A fourth involved creating, distributing, tabulating, and analyzing a survey of several middle schools to find out what students' peers predicted for the future. Yet another activity found students investigating the accuracy of predictions made for this decade 100 years ago.

These examples point out several key features of the new curriculum vision. One is that it compels teachers to work with students in ways that give the students a powerful voice in curriculum planning. This is quite different from adapting a planned curriculum to students' presumed needs. Certainly many teachers have taught exciting units like the one just described. But they have probably done

so within the confines of one subject, or by contriving contributions from several subjects. Here, the theme and activities emerge from the concerns of the students rather than the interests of a teacher or the manipulation of subject areas.

Another feature of this vision of curriculum is that it proceeds from a constructivist view. Since meanings are created by students rather than imposed by adults, students use their knowledge and skill to search for answers to their questions rather than to concentrate on passing exams or preparing for an occupation. Obviously this shift in the source of meanings redefines the role of the teacher from *knowledge gatekeeper* and *meaning maker* to *guide* and *facilitator*.

A third feature of this new curriculum is that it is knowledge-rich. Knowledge and skill are taken out of abstract subject categories and repositioned in the context of thematic units where they are more likely to develop. This kind of curriculum is appropriate for an era of knowledge explosion.

A fourth feature is that this curriculum presents an authentic integration of affect and cognition. The most important concerns of people in general, and early adolescents in particular, have to do with self and social, or affective, issues. Such issues are not simply a matter of emotion; we think about and act on them in terms of values, morals, and so on. Yet middle and other schools continue to treat affect and cognition as if their theoretical distinctions reflected real life. The new curriculum recognizes the artificiality of such distinctions and challenges their application in separate affective arrangements such as advisory programs.

Finally, the new curriculum departs from arrangements such as the earlier block-time core programs, which were scheduled alongside traditional subject courses, in that it is meant to serve as virtually the entire curriculum. The new curriculum embraces an entirely different theory of curriculum and learning than that of the subject-area approach. It assumes that a curriculum that facilitates integration and is person-centered, constructivist, and thematic makes sense, and, therefore, ought to be the whole curriculum.

Restructuring the Curriculum

Although arguments for an integrative curriculum have implications for all levels of education, my proposal (Beane, 1990a) focuses on the middle level for a simple reason: for three decades, people at the middle level have been more engaged than those in other levels in efforts to reform their schools. While most of their efforts have focused on institutional features and instructional methods, progress in many of the schools has been dramatic. For this reason, those at the middle level are perhaps more willing to consider larger possibilities, even some that would involve reforming curriculum.

The whole language approach now emerging at the elementary level clearly holds promise for an integrative curriculum there. And it may be that recent calls for integration emerging from subject-area associations may eventually crack even the hard subject categories at the high school level. But middle-level education cannot wait for such developments. Perhaps actions taken in the middle will support other levels in their efforts.

The question in curriculum reform remains: are educators willing to make a leap of faith on behalf of the young people schools are intended to serve? By *leap of faith*, I mean a willingness to turn themselves over to the young people, rather than to the abstract subject categories and artificial purposes that have plagued schooling for so long. Fortunately, this is not a blind leap, since we have known for many years that movement in this direction benefits both young people and their teachers (Jennings and Nathan, 1977). If we truly want integration in the curriculum, then we must think along the lines of the vision described here and extend the long struggle to make our rhetoric of concern for the young become a reality (Beane, 1987).

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For More Information

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